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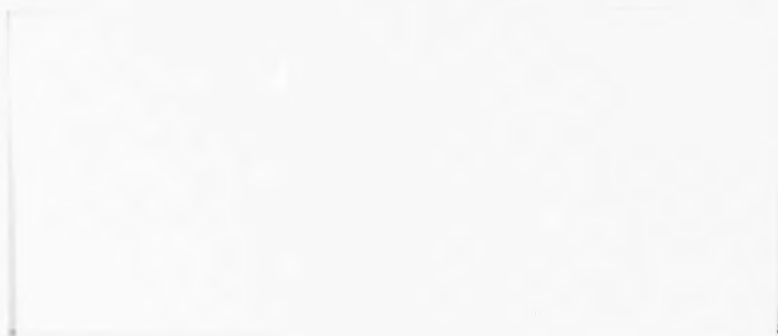
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Canada's Information Edge

- Ann Medina -





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CANADA'S INFORMATION EDGE

ANN MEDINA

Introduction

A year ago, Canada's tallest structure became a mere signpost for the American domination of information. A giant banner advertising Microsoft Corporation's *Windows 95* hung from Toronto's CN Tower.

The Cold War is over — the New War is underway. It is not a Cyber War, because it is not about technology and wires and chips. It is about information and cultural conquest. It is about values, monetary systems, theories of governance and education. It is about "Presidential" styles of government, about smart bombs, and televised legal systems. It is about hamburgers and running shoes. It is about standards of ethics and standards of living. Above all, it is about expectations and dreams. At stake is the protection of ideas.

In such a war, you can try and construct your own information shelter. You can erect walls, and rules to keep the invading forces out. Canada tried that and, for a while, it worked. But now the "attacks" are from all directions: from the skies, from the movie theatres, and they creep into your homes through your televisions, radios and computers... even through the Olympics where *Nike* banners told competitors "You don't win a silver, you lose the gold." Whether you're Canadian, Chinese, Cuban or American, you are being steered toward a value, an agenda.

It's called "soft power."¹ Hard power was, obviously, the military might of missiles, navies, tanks, and bombs. Soft power deals with knowledge and ideas and the technologies that can transmit them further, faster, and with greater effect. Although Canada was not one of the superpowers during the Cold War, it has the potential to play a major role in this new test of strength.

It has to. In the coming decade — starting now — make no mistake about it, that is what will give us a seat at the table. That is what will give us our ticket to the Group of Seven (G7) equivalent of the Information Age.

There are two major challenges facing Canada if it wants to be a major player in the New War, and they are closely tied together. First, we must decide how to position and promote our values — the values that push us to be who we are and to do what we do. Second, when we enter the ring we must be confident of who we are and the values we want to defend. The first challenge is the subject of this arti-

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1. Joseph Nye defines "soft power" as "convincing others to follow, or getting them to agree to norms and institutions that produce the desired behavior. Soft power can rest on the appeal of one's ideas or the ability to set the agenda in ways that shape the preference of others." See Joseph S. Nye and William A. Owens, "America's Information Edge," *Foreign Affairs*, (March/April 1996), 21.

cle. The second, and the more fundamental question, is for a different and much broader forum taking place across Canada today.

Canada has a history of achievement in the development of communication technologies, and so it is well-placed to communicate its ideas further and faster. It has been, by far, the world's most wired society. It was one of the first to launch and tap into the power of satellites. Northern Telecom has set international standards in communications research and innovation. And in recent years New Brunswick's sophisticated high-tech infrastructure has become a kind of Mecca for technology planners from all over the world. In addition, Canada has achieved an impressive profile in creating content for knowledge-driven industries. Its software producers from Corel to Delrina have been major international players; it is the world's second largest exporter of television programming; it has developed a sophisticated, knowledge-based workforce.

However, as important as technology is — even crucial to any strategy — it is the values and the information that will set Canada apart: its geography, its multiculturalism, its civility, and its tolerance. Whether these values are real or only perceived, they are the building blocks for any communications strategy.

Given its success in the development of information technology and its history

"...the new post-Cold War landscape is ready-made for Canada to flex its soft power muscle."

of peacekeeping and mediation in significant international negotiations, some say the new post-Cold War landscape is ready-made for Canada to flex its soft power muscle. But, so far, its advantages have been relatively ineffective in maximizing this power. Now, there are signs the gov-

ernment recognizes the untapped potential. This summer the federal government announced it wants to launch a new international communications strategy. This article is one outsider's attempt to set out some initial opening moves, to indicate a few directions we might follow, and, finally, to point out some of the bumps we'll be facing along the way. I will advocate a content-driven, multi-platformed, and layered strategy that targets regions and emphasizes open access to information.

Beginning at the Beginning

Canada wants to show off. It wants to strut its stuff on the world stage. It wants to project an identity that will enhance our already well-respected international reputation, boost our industries, help some of our neighbours to democratize and, maybe, at the same time, help to reinforce our own sense of ourselves back in Canada. We want profile. We want people to listen and watch who we are, what we are doing, and what we can do.

At the same time, as Canadians, we have neither the money nor the temperament to do it in the "American way" and just shout it out louder than anyone else. We be modest folk, and the medium must fit the message.

Initially, there was a lot of interest in establishing a new satellite broadcasting initiative along the lines of TV5, the French-language super-station with 20 per cent Canadian content that is distributed worldwide. There has also been some discussion of using the new Internet. And still others say, no, we should build on the already established strength of Radio Canada International (RCI) and expand its satellite capabilities.

In short, the debate on a new Canadian strategy has begun with the issue of *platform*. Instead, I propose that we begin with the basic question: what do we want to say? What do we want to communicate through some new sophisticated system? Instead of talking about platforms, we should begin with the question of *content*. What Canadian values do we want to trumpet? What kind of an effect do we want any information to have? What do we want to achieve with any communications strategy?

Do we want to provide information that would:

- Establish a Canadian perspective on international news?
- Feature Canada's commitment to human rights values around the world?
- Demonstrate Canada's advanced communications technology?
- Promote and reflect Canada's multicultural heritage?
- Reinforce Canada's richly deserved reputation as peacekeepers and mediators?
- Reflect Canada's interest in the welfare of children?
- Show the world that Canada can play a key role in preparing countries for democratization and good governance?

Twinned with each of the above is, obviously, a particular audience and a particular impact. With respect to the worldwide audience, do we want to reach a broad general public, or influential opinion-makers, or government and non-governmental aid workers in developing countries? Do we want to target business interests in order to support and promote our technology industries? Or, is there, perhaps, some way of combining a number of the above?

It is very tempting to come up with a "grand plan" to do something BIG, something major. For example, some suggest that we establish our own Cable News Network (CNN) but with a more public-affairs twist. Should we launch a Canada network that would air Canadian information and programming twenty-four hours a day around the world? Ten years ago that may have worked. Today, though, there are a lot of CNNs, TV5s and British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBCs) out there, and changes in technology and opportunities are bombarding us by the month.

How do we create a new broadcasting entity in a manner we can afford to not only launch, but also to sustain over a period of time? The days of pouring millions of dollars into such a communications initiative are over. It may sound important. It is important. But how do we justify it when Johnny now sits in a classroom with 50 other kids, or the waiting list for open heart surgery grows? We can't afford it, and it won't work.

How then, do we avoid getting buried or outdated or both in an affordable communications strategy? Maybe before we take the plunge, we should first take a cool, hard look at the environment around us — the environment that any initiative will have to fit into.

What's Going On

Consider the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). In less than a decade, we have seen the growth of four new "CBCs": CBC Cable (or Newsworld), CBC Internet (<http://www.cbc.ca>), CBC Satellite (or Newsworld International), and finally, this fall of 1996 we saw the launch of Newsworld's first WebNet.² In the next five years, we will, no doubt, see refinements of those services and other new "CBCs" as digital technology grows.

A similar trend can be found with other broadcasters. At a recent meeting of CBC's Board of Directors, board members, for example, were advised to think in terms of many "CBCs" for the future rather than concentrating on what "the" CBC should look like. And therein lies a lesson for the federal government. Internet? Broadcasting? Satellite channel? Which do we choose? If we can take any guidance

"...the viewer-network relationship will radically change, and the emphasis will shift to the program."

from other "broadcasters," they are discovering that flexibility is absolutely essential as the various technologies evolve and converge.

Some of the linear concepts of "programming" that we're familiar with today, will either disappear or be radically changed when convergence

becomes more of reality rather than simply the *Windows 95* promise of the 1990's.

In a converged world where the television is the computer is the television — we will have the capabilities to choose a program. We won't necessarily be tuning into the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) or CBC or TV5 or Microsoft (yes, it is a broadcaster too!). We'll probably be selecting this program or that program to be viewed at any time of the day or night.

Obviously, that will significantly change both the role and the profile of the broadcaster as we now know it today. For example, there will be no such thing as a network's "schedule," rather a network will have a list of programs to choose from. Prime time, therefore, disappears although there will still obviously be peak viewing periods. What all this means is that the viewer-network relationship will radically change, and the emphasis will shift to the program.

As for the Internet, many point out that it is a medium for the wealthy. It is a phenomenon that may rage throughout North America, Europe and Japan, but it barely touches people in the developing world. The reason? Telephone wires. In many regions, telephone systems, despite Northern Telecom's best efforts, have not penetrated the countryside and often exist in very on-again-off-again modes of operation.

2. A WebNet is a kind of a "station" on the Internet. It has live radio sounds, live video, live chats and could have a menu of choices that changes each hour.

If we decide the target audience in some new communications strategy should be the opinion-makers and the members of the G7 club, that doesn't matter much. But if we wish to reach a broader constituency, some argue we should forget the Internet as a primary source of communication.

Well, again, what's true today may not be applicable tomorrow or next week or next month. In fact, telephone access is far more common than many believe. Satellite phones are coming into places (e.g., Egypt) where wires have been far too costly and, of course, the whole technology of wireless communication may make an even greater difference.

The *Globe and Mail* ran a photograph this past year that showed the side of an apartment building in a newly-democratized country in Eastern Europe. Years ago, it might have shown a rooftop with dozens of television antennae. In this photo, dozens and dozens of the latest mini-satellite dishes were all turned to the skies to absorb the latest in Western-style programming.

If we recall the speed with which the world's poor, often in remote rural areas, "found" the television, we might not be too sceptical in thinking they'll find ways to connect to the Internet very soon. And, perhaps, with more to gain than many of us in modern urban settings where we can tap into expert knowledge, they will be more motivated.

Too often we look around us at a given moment and use those observations to determine directions that we assume will last into at least the immediate future. Again and again, we have to ask ourselves, what could change? How might the rules and the conventions and the practices that we see around us evolve? How can we make sure that our decisions today stay relevant? Well, obviously we can't. But we can try to imagine the unimaginable and who knows, maybe we'll be more prepared for the next Berlin Wall to come crumbling down.

Digital, wireless, and satellite technologies will open up new possibilities for programming and communications on a global scale. At the same time, some of the more conventional forms of distribution are becoming more difficult to access as the "big-boys" merge and converge in order to stay in the game of de-regulated competition. For example, Newsworld International had originally intended to get a broader viewership base by being on some US cable services in addition to its single subscriber satellite base. Now, they're discovering that it is considerably more expensive than it once was, and the playing field is getting more crowded rather than less with the addition of new channel capacity. The CBC and Power Corporation had written up an impressive business plan — they were stepping into an evolving geography of channels and marketing and opportunity. But, in a few short years — the ground had shifted.

As mentioned, CNN's supremacy is being challenged, most prominently by Microsoft and NBC and others; the conventional networks are all hungrily eyeing cable, Internet, wireless and satellite possibilities as they branch out. And, of course, they're getting gobbled up by the Sonys and the Warners and the media giants in related fields.

The world of communications are now attracting some of the biggest megaplayers we've ever seen. And we're fools if we wonder why. Given their involve-

ment, billions of dollars are going to continue to be thrown at the development and exploitation of communication media. That, of course, means that changes will be even more rapid than we're seeing at present. Compare it, if you will, to the race between Japan and the West to develop the atomic bomb. With so much at stake, enormous sums of money and energies were devoted to solving the problem. It was the top priority. Well, a new race for world domination has begun.

So where can Canada fit in?

Finding a Place for Canada

Click....A major Hollywood movie not yet out on video
 Click....CNN headlines
 Click....Latest stock market quotes
 Click....BBC World Service
 Click....A 3-part special on oceans
 Click....A 2-week course on marketing for seniors
 Click....Sega video game
 Click....The latest weather in North America

In Bill Gates's words, "Where do you want to go today?" You can choose from a telephone-book-thick schedule of programs if you've got your own satellite. If not, well, even your friendly hotel has some 30 channels plus some six to eight pay options. And, of course, this is only the beginning. This is even before we have the 200-channel universe and even before convergence has transformed our computers into multi-access magic boxes that can video-conference, download movies and link up to whatever program we want whenever we want to watch it.

On the Internet, we all know the hundreds of thousands of "dot coms" out there and, of course, the fifteen-thousand newsgroups that are downloaded before you decide which "alt. site" to visit. We can chat, we can talk-back, we can read, we can play, we can write letters, we can listen, we can watch videos — all on the Net. But, without a sky-high neon signpost, how do you find what's there? How do we know that there's a Taj Mahal or a Royal Ontario Museum to walk through and visit?

Obviously an assumption here is that we want to communicate something to a broad audience, not simply one of a few hundred. We're talking about an audience that isn't simply made up of Canadians abroad and, given the kinds of dollars we're spending on TV5, doesn't duplicate the efforts we're already making.³

So how does Canada make a place for itself in a way that it isn't already doing? How do we reach new audiences and significant ones? Consider the following: You're tired. You've just checked into your hotel and you have a few spare hours — that's *after* you've checked your electronic mail (and responded) and *after* you've checked your telephone messages and faxes (and responded). Finally, you have a bit of time for yourself. You turn on the television and zap between the various channels.

3. Although TV5 is held up by some to be a model for achieving the kind of international profile any new Canadian strategy would aim for, the numbers of actual viewers is still unknown. TV5 has the figures for "reach" or the number of people who have access to it, but not for people who actually tune in.

What would you want to watch?

Too often we glibly talk of what we want others to know about us, forgetting to ask whether anyone would even be interested. It's one thing when people have little choice as in schools or two-channel universes. But when you multiply the choices by ten-fold or a hundred-fold, there must be something damn arresting for people to tune in to.

There are three possible ways to enhance Canada's position in such a grab-bag. Some of these ways have to do with who we are and how we're seen by others. First, if a fairly *specific audience* is targeted, then programming or information can be tailored to it. Obviously, the narrower the focus, the greater the chances of attracting viewers. This is the niche-approach. It has been used successfully by the cable industry in the selection of programming and has led to increased revenues.

Canada is viewed as being very skilful in developing programming for niche markets given its position as the world's second largest exporter of television programming. Its success is attributable to a focus on children's programming and animation, on arts documentaries, on musical specials, on social and current affairs documentaries, and most recently, on digital animation. We have left, for the most part, the continuing dramatic series to the Americans (though "Due South" and "Street Legal" are two of a number of exceptions). This is not to say that any new government information strategy should involve animation, and arts documentaries, but rather that Canada has built up a reputation in these niches, and so programs that build on that success will have a head start.

"Canada is viewed as being very skilful in developing programming for niche markets..."

Second, if some *value-added service* is offered in a foreign country as an incentive for companies or a government to hook into our system, then there may be a logical *quid pro quo*. Service to them in exchange for listening to us. By "service," I mean the kinds of assistance for which Canada already has an outstanding record of providing. We have helped countries such as South Africa and Poland make the transition towards a more democratized-system of governance. Our diplomats play important roles as mediators in international negotiations as they did recently in the progress towards a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Meanwhile, Canadian aid workers help to set up health care networks, link school systems, and provide technical assistance.

Through linkage, Canada could twin such projects with a broader communications component that could not only fortify our efforts, emphasize access, but also raise our profile. Naturally, the government or the community would have to play a role in promoting its visibility and presence on whatever platform would be appropriate.

Third, if we position ourselves prominently in the areas of *providing information in news and current affairs*, not only would we build on the reputations already

established by RCI, TVOntario (TVO), and the CBC,⁴ but we would also tap into what's considered by some to be a gold mine of credibility. We are not the United States. We are not Great Britain. And, to many, that means that we have a kind of independent status that gives our reporting a special integrity. I remember when I was reporting from around the world, I could often breeze through doors closed to my American Broadcasting Corporation or BBC colleagues. China and Syria are but two examples.

By either airing an existing Canadian news service (including Canadian news) or producing a new program that might air on a network or be on a WebNet, we would not only attract an audience, but strengthen the view of Canadians as reliable filters for what's taking place around the world. This approach fits with who we are and how others see us. In addition, we might air some of that information in other languages which would not only increase our visibility and relevance to a region, but also bolster our multicultural and multilingual national heritage.

Woven through all these points is a vision of demonstrated Canadian values. By using that identity to not only shape the content but also the format of that content, we would be using our national strengths to naturally place us in a global context. We would stand out and we would be doing things in our own unique way.

Shaping the Message

By now, you see where I am going. The technology is changing at a rat-a-tat rate so that it might be unwise to put all of our efforts into one medium. You don't gamble by playing only one hand. In addition, not only are our resources insufficient to set some new splashy broadcasting initiative in motion, but more important, they could not sustain it over a period of time. Rather, we should *focus, focus, focus*. And that leads me to three conclusions.

First, we should think in terms of "programs" or single initiatives rather than whole networks or broadcasting. Programs and single-subject projects will be the currency of the future. Besides, they're cheaper than setting up a whole broadcasting infrastructure,⁵ and they can be pulled down quicker when technology or the politics of a given country shifts.

Second, given that we can't be all things to all people, we should single out regions and target specific audiences rather than "the world." Yes, we may prefer the ocean to the small pond, but we could be more effective if we tie the choices of those regions to some event or other project we might be involved in. If, for example, we had such a strategy in place, we might have been targeting some of the member countries of the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC), given that Vancouver will be hosting its annual meeting in September 1997.

Third, we should think in terms of multi-platforms and consider which platform is best suited to some specific content.

4. CBC's Journal documentaries routinely aired on PBS, BBC in addition to ARD in Germany, and also in Italy, Japan and elsewhere. Often because of their topicality, they ran on the same night as the CBC broadcast.
5. One suggestion has been to join with other Commonwealth countries to establish an English broadcasting equivalent to TV5. My impression, shared by others, is that we might not get the kind of visibility-clout to merit the dollars spent. This has been a continuing issue in the case of TV5: that the Canadian content gets lost in the mix, and that its biggest audience for Canadian news are travelling Canadians.

The content should drive the exercise, not the platform. Do we want to communicate information on some topic? Then, probably the Internet (with appropriate positioning) might be the best medium. Do we want to entertain, for example, in the area of children's programming? Then, we might think about a specific program to go on a satellite broadcast.

Given our assumption that we want more than a select few to be watching or receiving the content — how do we make that happen? How do we become distinctive in universes with hundreds of channels and hundreds of thousands of web sites? How do we set ourselves apart?

Well, the short answer is that we probably can't. We will need to allocate a healthy budget for promotion and publicity, but we would be kidding ourselves if we thought that would enable us to "compete" with the Americans or the Europeans. But, there are a few things that might help to single us out.

Being First. On the Internet, any site that's a "first" gets a lot of attention. The first site to offer downloadable video, the first site to use RealAudio that plays sounds live, or, last year, the first site to use VDOLive that plays video live, or the first site that allows us to view 3-D graphics gets immense free promotion. Recently, PointCast News became the first "design-your-own-news" site. It quickly became one of the Web's most visited sites. The "firsts" are constantly changing, but if a site comes up with something new and technologically original, it will stand out. Obviously, this has more of an impact in the developed world.

"The content should drive the exercise, not the platform."

Language. Language can almost be considered a kind of platform. As of now, at least 90 per cent of the Internet is in English or French. If you're looking for content in Swahili, Polish, Arabic or Chinese, the selection is slim. What that means is that the chances of finding Canadian information would be considerably improved if it were translated into a number of languages. Given that such countries may be the very ones we would want to target, translation, as RCI has demonstrated, becomes a very attractive tool to replace the neon sign.

Local Relevance. Continuing, at least partially, on the language issue, in regions where there is little Internet activity, linking a Canadian site to local sites would greatly benefit our ability to attract visitors. Also, the identification of Canada with local businesses and organizations substantially enhances our credibility.

The Stuff

So how would this all work? It's all very fine for one to talk of "content" and "platforms," but what would it all look like? How would a focused communications policy function? To answer that basic question we need some examples and possibilities. I say examples and possibilities, because any decision about content would have to flow from whatever the government considers to be its priorities.

Assume for the sake of argument that Canada has a strategy in place and is planning a number of initiatives to coincide with the APEC meeting. Presumably

one of its interests would be to promote Canada's impressive history in the field of communication technology. It could do that in a number of ways, but I will concentrate on two.

First, it could go the Internet route along the lines of its existing Web sites such as Industry Canada and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade model at <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca> (not, by the way, a user-friendly name that just, naturally, comes to mind!). This would be a straightforward dissemination of pertinent information about Canadian companies that, hopefully, some of the APEC members would be interested in obtaining. We could add to the site's potential by translating such material into a number of appropriate languages thereby positioning us as separate from the rest of the pack of thousands. In addition, Canada's multilingual, multicultural profile would be reinforced through practice rather than simply assertion. Good, but not great.

A different approach would be to demonstrate our expertise through the co-ordinated efforts of a number of government departments in partnership with private industry. This would be a value-added type of project that would involve a double-use of the technology itself. First, the technology would be used to contribute something that a given APEC member-state would need. It could be some kind of school-to-school link, or hospital-enhancement (along the lines of what's being done at the Ottawa Heart Institute, for example).

With the technology for high-speed communication in place, Canada could then use that same pipeline to put any one of a number of other programs in place. For example, it could link up with Canada for a two-way video-conference; it could air some program with a potential for feedback from the host country; it could link into a sophisticated database with digitally animated examples of Canada's technology; or it could link up with a neighbouring country that may wish to set up some kind of industrial development.

Meanwhile, Canada could also initiate a month of Canadian news on a satellite channel where we might actually buy the time. Presumably, we would use CBC material, but more on that later. We could supplement that news with documentary-style reports about the technology-twinning mentioned above, or about some Canadian aid project that is taking place in the local area. Finally, RCI could, perhaps, insert additional programming into its schedule that would tie in and capitalize on the targeted area either by language or relevant content.⁶

The point is to build a number of different *layers* of communication with a geographical focus, and hopefully, pick a time when Canada might be involved with the country in some way so that its presence would be relevant rather than arbitrary. The reasoning behind such an approach is fairly basic. It's the same principle of choosing a time to report, for example, on India's objections to a test ban treaty. India has been fairly consistent in its positions over a number of years, but the time to talk about them is when India's vote is key for the adoption of such a treaty. Then people care. They have a context. They understand a relevance that they may not if we air such a report at some other time.

6. As must be evident, I feel there is a very relevant and important role that RCI could play in any new strategy. It has a built-in audience that such a strategy could expand upon, and it still covers areas that are not "plugged in" to the new platforms.

Other ideas involve the two-way capabilities of the Internet: Why not launch a WebNet that paired up people from warring areas to talk to each other? Again, we would be using our peacekeeping image in an entirely new way, geared towards communications rather than the battlefield. We could also create an Internet soap opera that focusses on two families at loggerheads over religious (e.g., Northern Ireland) or ethnic differences (e.g., Sri Lanka). Add a Romeo and Juliet kind of couple and, through compelling story telling, lead the viewers towards a compassionate interest.

Finally, for Canada's international communications approach to feed into its variety of interests as described above, a single program on a satellite basis (again, in contrast to a whole network) could be launched. It would be a kind of late-night Journal without the documentary element, and would be truly international in scope. It would pair writers and city planners and rock stars and generals from different countries in a sort of Larry King Live with two guests instead of one. Although it is not exactly an original sounding idea, such an animal doesn't exist yet and there are those who say only Canada could carry it off. We have a reputation as credible filters or mediators of information and are seen to be skilled in the delivery of that format.

Who Makes and Controls the Content?

The question continually comes up — should the government be the creator of content or should it simply provide the funding, partial or otherwise? My answer is an unequivocal — sometimes, maybe, rarely. Once again, it depends on what forms of programming we're talking about.

Taking the scenarios noted above, I see the government providing very little in the way of content. It could perhaps co-ordinate the Internet material and pay for the translations. But the actual information on the companies, for example, should come from the companies themselves. Business people know what they can do and what they want to stress. They probably know as much, if not more, about foreign markets than the government does. As for documentaries on Canadian aid projects or any other programming with the potential to enhance Canada's image abroad, although the government could conceivably produce them, the credibility of the information being broadcast would be higher if they were independently produced. Obviously, the same goes for the Journal-type of program.

Clearly, I am biased here, tied as I am to a certain view of the value of journalism. I also feel that viewers are very smart and are quick to ask, "How do I know this is all true?" Unlike some of my colleagues, I would not go so far as to reject any government funding,⁷ but it would have to be at arm's-length with all editorial control in the hands of an independent producer.

In general, then, government itself should contribute very little in the way of content. It could, as it has in the past, dictate the priorities of subject matter

7. I will not undertake here any discussion of the complexities and delicacy of such an arrangement. Nor will I defend my view against the claim that he who pays controls. I'll merely repeat that it is not the ideal set-up, but given current financial realities it may be the only way to get such information reported. In addition, we already have government funding with Telefilm and CBC, don't we?

regarding children's programming, adult education, news or material on democratization and governance, or whatever. However, the expertise to create the content should come from people outside the government whether they're from industry, news organizations, hospitals, universities or independent producers.

Undoubtedly, at times, independently produced programs will cause the government some discomfort. So be it. In fact, I would argue that such a situation would, more often than not, enhance Canada's profile as a country that encourages differences of views.

It is very tempting for any government to want to control what is said and what information is disseminated, but I would vigorously oppose it. As mentioned, audiences these days are very smart. If the United States were to start up a Voice of America today, I think it would fail. Not only has the position of the United States substantially changed in the minds of people around the world, but their

"It is very tempting for any government to want to control what is said and what information is disseminated..."

sophistication in recognizing and rejecting "state-sponsored" information has significantly grown in the past three decades. Too often they have received "other" sources of information from the notorious faxes of Tiananmen to the shortwave broadcasts of RCI and the BBC. And

if we want to reach the people who want and need accurate information, they will be precisely the ones who will be sceptical and want to know the source.

Paying for It

So let's say it's a go. The government comes up with a layered, multi-platformed, geographically-focused strategy that adapts medium to content. Who pays? Quite simply, the government would pay a lot of it, but it would work with partners who either would also pay a lot when they see a benefit, or would make substantial in-kind contributions to the development of content. Again, a few examples will illustrate how it might work.

A company is targeting a foreign market for high technology sales. The federal government is targeting that same country for its next focused communications initiative. The company might be very eager and willing to set up some kind of demonstration project whose value would be greatly enhanced by a partnership with the Canadian government. Such a company would foot a substantial part of the bill to put the technology infrastructure in place, or to buy broadcasting time, or make satellite space available. Many countries look more favourably at industries and companies that are being backed and boosted by their governments. That has been part of the success of the "Team Canada" approach to trade promotion.

It is vital, however, to consider the process of partnership in addition to the financial advantages. It is common knowledge at some corporate headquarters that a federal minister wrote a number of chief executive officers asking them to contribute half a million dollars to a partnership project with Ottawa. The problem was

that the project had already been designed and initiated completely by bureaucrats with no initial input from the private sector. The request was rejected.

Often, when corporate decision makers are asked to be involved at the early stages of some project, they are asked to attend "speech-making meetings" that decide little. We have all attended such meetings. They are generally large and within the two to three hours allotted, each person will have the chance to state two or three thoughts. Period. That format may work for the tossing around of ideas and exploration, but it is totally inadequate for the planning and designing of specific and often costly projects. What the industry would like to see is a small group of five or six people determining the foundation for a co-operative venture before any commitments are actually made. The communications strategy would still be shaped by Ottawa, but the content of any specific initiative within that framework would be developed by a true partnership.

If Ottawa wants to have active and aggressively enthusiastic private partners, it must re-think the process of mutual involvement. If that is done and it can be demonstrated that both sides would gain, there would be a number of willing corporate partners.

But there is also a different kind of partnership to consider, namely, in the area of programming. Sometimes companies or foundations may pay for the programming to be aired in a region where the company might want exposure or the foundation may have an interest. The Heritage Minutes in Canada might provide a kind of model where Canada Post and the Charles R. Bronfman Foundation are jointly sponsoring the series.

In other instances, Ottawa would pay. Here, we are talking about the kind of programming that celebrates what's Canadian and does it out of a tradition of excellence that is recognized around the world. Naturally, I immediately think of the CBC and its acknowledged need for more programming dollars.

The federal government would function as a kind of broadcaster by either buying or commissioning programs for air. Given that it doesn't have a network *per se*, it would only be interested in a limited number of very specific kinds of programs rather than having to fill an entire schedule. To air them, it might buy time on a national channel, or it might be allotted the time in the quid pro quo kind of arrangement mentioned earlier.

If we're talking about a strong news and current affairs emphasis, the government might use existing TVO educational series, or CBC programming such as Newsworld International or Newsworld's newly launched WebNet. I recognize that Newsworld International is the child of a partnership between CBC and Power Corporation, but, given that Canada would be targeting either countries not already included in Newsworld International's existing satellite footprint, or regions for only a limited period of time, there might not be a commercial conflict of interest that would prevent Power Corporation from co-operating.

It should be noted that some of the regional markets are not exactly big buyers with big bucks for Canadian programming, so we might not have some of the distribution problems that we would have if we were dealing on a worldwide basis. The question of rights is an additional argument against the broadcasting option.

World rights are very expensive. But if we were to limit the programming across an entire schedule to those carrying "affordable" world rights, our audience would be drastically reduced and, perhaps, not justify the launch of such a network. The rights to French-language programming, by the way, are not as great.

In a focused, single program option, the narrow timeframe and the limited geographical scope might make it possible to include a whole range of top quality privately produced programs that, thus far, have a rather narrow distribution. The question of distribution is key, because it is imperative that any new Canadian programming initiative not weaken or reduce the commercial interests of existing Canadian companies.

A new strategy should not conflict with what the private television producers and distributors are already doing, or, just as important, ignore the value of their exports in that Canadian strategy. In fact, I would propose that the government use what already may exist to add even more clout to a communications assault. If, for example, Canada is targeting a particular geographical area, it would be beneficial to both the government and private industry to see what kinds of additional marketing dollars could be made available during that strategic launch (especially, since marketing was one of the areas affected in Telefilm's recent cutbacks). If a Canadian company sold more programs as a result, it would benefit, but so too would Canada.

Once the concept of layering is adopted, a whole range of different partnerships are possible with the technology companies as well as public and private program or internet producers. It would not be cheap. It should not be cheap. But it would cost less than a number of other options that would launch whole networks or try to reach too broad an audience. If we focus, focus, focus, we will add greater value to every dollar spent.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the changes are coming fast, and the players in both the international capitals and the corporate multinational headquarters are moving their pawns and kings around at a furious rate. Canada must move fast to make the most of the kinds of advantages it has established over the past decade.

We are well-positioned. The defining character of the new information age fits our values of access, pluralism, and mediation. And they can effectively promote our values of human rights, compassion and democracy. Combined with our sophisticated development of the technology, we can exercise a lot of "soft power" clout. We understand the success of the Team Canada approach to technical and industrial deal-making. Now, we should apply the same partnerships with the private sector to an international communications strategy.

What is needed is not government control, but government leadership. And we need a leadership that makes the difficult choices of priorities. We can no longer display the scatter-gun approach that is promoted in the Foreign Affairs internet site where an apparently random assortment of pages are listed from Prefabricated kitchen cabinets in new German states to a Colombian economy

update. Instead, we need a coherent, targeted approach that has a logic and leads us towards a defined and transparent goal.

The content must mirror the values we share in Canada, and it must use the communications technology that we have excelled in creating. The goal is not industrial, it is not cultural and it is not an extension of government interests. It is all of them, layered in such a way to reinforce and spotlight the kind of priorities we want other nations to share.

It's time for us to build that **third pillar of foreign policy**. It's time because culture and information are our newest and best 'defense' weapons. And over the last decade we have built up a valuable arsenal. It's time to parade it in front of the world.

